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A seriously comic novel, very well received, based on the ‘diary’ of Miriam Prewd, who stayed in St Just-near-Trunch for a single year in 1904/5. Sid adds his own commentary, and excerpts of songs.

Published by the Mousehold Press
ISBN no 1 874739 03X .

The beginning of

PREWD AND PREJUDICE

(A Norfolk Exile)

by Chris Sugden and Sid Kipper

MARCH 1904

25 March, Friday

No gentlewoman should have to come to such a house as this. The landlord should be horsewhipped for the shameful way in which it has been neglected. Or rather, since the landlord is a member of the nobility, his agent should be horsewhipped. Indeed, I would carry out the punishment myself, were it not for a suspicion that he would enjoy it.

The village of St Just-near-Trunch itself is no better. Plants grow everywhere and the natives do nothing to discourage them. These wretches live dismal lives, devoid of most of the necessities of life. There is no milliner for miles, a manicure is quite unobtainable, and Harrods flatly refuse to deliver. I am only 150 miles from London but I feel as far from civilisation as any missionary cast among the savages of the South Seas.

However, since I am compelled to come here and write this diary I must make the best of it. To this end I have already managed to engage the services of a

housemaid. She is Maud Kipper, whose family have vegetated in these parts for more generations than their limited numeracy would allow them to calculate. Maud was the only applicant for the post: one would almost think the common people of the area are unaware of the pleasures of serving their betters. How I will manage to train a simple country girl to be of the slightest use I do not know, but I suppose I shall make something of her. We will begin by scrubbing the house from cellar to attic. If necessary I shall supervise the work myself.

****

Dorian Prewd Esq. died in April 1903 in suspicious circumstances – including at least one member of the court and a string of race horses. His wife, Miriam, brazened this out, declaring that all men had their little peculiarities and it would be a fine world indeed if those who had bought privilege were not allowed to enjoy it. Then she discovered he had left her penniless, facing a life of poverty and hardship.

Appalled at this prospect she went to the only person she could really trust, a publisher by the name of Penguin. She knew she had some talent as a writer, but what should she write? What would sell? Penguin told her that the book world was in a slump and nothing was selling. There was, however, one slim hope. Penguin felt that in years to come there might be a market for the diaries of Edwardian women Jiving in the country. What about those living in town, she enquired hopefully. No. they definitely had to live in the country, he thought, and was prepared to back his opinion by paying Miriam to go and live in the country for a year, to write a diary for publication at some future date.

What could she do? She loathed the country. More than that she loathed the idea of her fashionable friends discovering that she was actually *living* there. Yet there was no alternative. So she stiffened her upper lip and agreed to go, on condition that she went somewhere so remote that no word of her presence there would ever reach Town. Thus the village of St Just-near-Trunch in Norfolk was selected for her exile. As she herself wrote:

‘Even if anyone does come to hear of it, they will never believe that such a place really exists.’

26 March, Saturday

Scrubbing away the dirt has only revealed further decay. Everything in this house is

painted brown – which is, of course, as it should be – but it is such an unfashionable brown. Maud says it is called ‘muckwash’. When I asked her what sort of a colour that might be she replied that it mightn’t be a colour at all, but a material. This left me none the wiser.

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The house Mrs Prewd rented stood slightly outside the village of Trunch, in the neighbouring parish of St Just-near-Trunch. It was built in 1771 as a toll house on the Suffield to Mundesley turnpike, but the road never reached it. The project was abandoned when the backers realised that no one actually wanted to travel from Suffield to Mundesley, let alone pay for the privilege.

By 1904 the only trace remaining was the large toll house jutting out into the bleak Norfolk countryside, at the corner of Side Street and Back Lane. It was useless to its owner, Lord Silver-Darling, who was no doubt delighted to get it off his hands for a while.

The house no longer stands, nor does any complete picture of it survive. It was completely destroyed in a raid by German naval airships on the night of 19/20 January 1915.* Rumours still persist that the raid was the result of a personal favour owed by the Kaiser to His Lordship, who was then able to collect on the insurance.

* See Arthur Banks, *A Military Atlas of the First World War*, Pernell, 1975.

29 March, Tuesday

Today I called on the vicar of St Just-near-Trunch, the Rev. Ashley Mullett. This was the first social call I have made since coming to this wretched backwater and it was hardly a success. I had expected him to be eager to welcome to his flock someone with a modicum of re-finement and education. When I sent in my card, however his man returned with a message: ‘His Reverence is busy attending to a fallen woman, and could you return in an hour or so?’

I walked on into the heart of the village, which seems to consist chiefly of a few shops, a low den called The Goat and the church itself.

Norfolk, I have been told, is a county rich in beautiful churches and just such a gem is wasted here on those without the refinement to appreciate it. I spent an hour looking round the building I was accompanied by a pathetic, cringing wretch, who I

took at first to be a homeless beggar, but later found to be the curate. The church is especially noted, I gather, for its magnificent Saxon doorknob. Apparently it once had a marvelous collection of gold and silver plate too, but in recent years this has gone missing in mysterious circumstances.

On returning to the vicarage I was informed that Rev. Mullett's visitor was still with him, having fallen further than His Reverence had at first thought, and therefore needing considerably more of his time. So I was forced to exchange intelligent conversation for Maud's inanity.

Much of what Maud says is incomprehensible. She is such a strange girl. She tells the most alarming tales of her relatives and I wonder whether I have been wise to engage her somewhat limited services. Beggars, as my Uncle Wesley used to say, cannot be choosers. But I have always before been a chooser.

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Mrs Prewd may have had her doubts about engaging Maud Kipper, but my researches into the diary have been greatly assisted by Maud's great-nephew, Sid Kipper, who is a mine of information on local history and customs, as well as providing many of the old songs which I have used to illustrate the text.

Aunt Maud died in 1933, from consumption. She consumed two bottles of whisky for a bet. Tragic, it was. Well, I mean, she won the bet but she couldn't collect her winnings. However, my uncle George got the money for her, and he spent it the way he reckoned she would have wished. He bought a load of beer for himself.

Sid is also something of an expert on the history of St Just's church:

The old church was built by the Sextons, who come over here from the continent. I don't know which continent – America I suppose. Anyhow, they built the church and they ran it for years, until it was taken over by the Anglicans, who'd come over in the same boat. You know, the Anglicans and the Sextons. The Anglicans run the church to this very day, but we've only got one Sexton left. At one time I believe they did have a load of posh crockery what the Lord used to eat his supper off, but that all went missing about the time my Great Uncle Albert ran off to sea. Of course, they used to have a load of lead on the roof, but that vanished too. About the time my uncle George went on his world cruise that would be. They don't seem to have a lot of luck with metal up at the church. I've often thought about travelling myself,

but I don’t suppose you’d get far on an old doorknob.

I have visited the church many times, mostly to claim sanctuary when the villagers have grown angry at all my questions. It has an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity which is quite different to that other social centre of the village, the Old Goat Inn. Sitting in the church, or indeed standing in it – or even lying down – you feel the presence of Truncheons past, passing back in an unbroken chain to times long before Mrs Prewd’s visit. Somehow you feel that the things which seemed so important before, such as this book for instance, are of no consequence whatsoever. Many people have told me the same thing.

30 March, Wednesday

What a delight for me when the vicar returned my call of yesterday, and had the kindness to take tea and muffins, and cake, and indeed anything else he was offered. He may be only a vicar, but he has the appetite of an Archbishop.

Rev. Mullett is a man of middle years with the remains of nice manners. Educated in London, he was the incumbent of one of those dreaming spires of Oxford until he felt a calling to leave there and come to work as a sort of missionary amongst the unlettered degenerates of this area. Or, as he calls them, ‘the common folk’. In particular his mission is to fallen women and he assures me that he spends much of his time touring the area in search of them.

It must be said that Rev. Mullett shows signs of having ‘gone native’, as my Uncle Wesley would have said, or, as we say in London, ‘back to basics’. It is, perhaps, inevitable that ten years in a place like this would leave its mark. I am only thankful that my own stay is to last but a single year, or, as it is now, 360 days, 15 hours and some minutes. However, I do feel that one must entertain doubts about a man of decent education who sits in one’s parlour, chewing on a straw and spitting fragments out on to the rug. I have decided that I must excuse him his idiosyncrasies and make a firm acquaintance of him, since we are clearly two of the few civilised people hereabouts.

I pointed out to Rev. Mullett that I found the lack of refinement of the area depressing, but he defended his common folk stoutly. ‘Mrs Prewd,’ he said, ‘it is not right to be too harsh on them. They have their own ways, which are somewhat rough and ready, and often hard for us to understand, but underneath it all they have livers of gold.’ I am still at a loss for the meaning of this strange statement.

As the vicar was leaving I apologised for having missed church on Sunday, but assured him that I would not fail to attend on Friday if he would let me know the hour of the service. He looked at me quizzically. ‘Friday?’ he said. ‘Well, it is Good Friday,’ I answered. ‘Oh yes, I had thought of having some sort of a gathering, but changed my mind when I saw upon what date it fell. It does not do to tempt fate, Mrs Prewd.’ With this astonishing pronouncement still hanging in the air he mounted his donkey and left.

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The Reverend Ashley Mullett was known during his life for his good works. “Fallen women’, as they were then known, were a speciality of his. Fallen men, on the other hand, were of no interest to him. They were forced to seek the help of the rector of a nearby parish, whose talents lay more in that direction.

The Rev. Mullett was laid to rest in the churchyard of St Just-near-Trunch – on more than one occasion, as it happens – but eventually passed away in 1936. He was much loved in the village because of the way he fitted in with local habits – precisely what Mrs Prewd complained about.

‘Back to basics’, incidentally, seems to have had a very precise meaning in 1904, unlike today, when it has become quite meaningless.

APRIL 1904

1 April, Good Friday

How very strange it seemed not to be in church on a Good Friday morning. After all, this is a day of penance and fasting, and there seems little point in going to that sort of trouble in private, where others cannot gain from the example. Since it is a public holiday I allowed Maud light duties such as chopping wood, cleaning the chimneys, and so on. I do not think I shall be so generous in the future, however, as she was quite ungrateful.

Maud did throw some light on Rev. Mullett’s remarks about the day. It seems that Good Friday this year coincides with a local festival known as ‘All Idiots Day. As one might expect with people of this sort it is the latter which takes precedence.

At about two o’clock I glanced out of the window to see a peculiar sight. Up the lane came a procession of ruffians, some playing drums and other such unmusical

instruments, and chanting:

‘All idiots, all idiots, watch out what we do,

For ’tis all our desire to prove you a idiot, too.’

As they passed the hedge I saw that they wore a strange assortment of head-dresses, constructed from the crudest of materials. I eventually realised that these pitiful creations were supposed to resemble the heads of various animals, though I challenge anyone to discern the species.

As the column passed I noticed that the rear was brought up by something quite different. It was immediately recognisable to anyone who has visited the zoological gardens in Regent’s Park as the head of a polar bear.

I was pondering the significance of all this when Maud rushed in crying ‘Look, Mrs Prewd, there come the idiots!’ Before I could correct her grammar she had taken off to follow them.

Later, as I tried to drink an appalling cup of tea, which I had been forced to make myself, I heard a knock at the door. I answered it, but there was no one there. This happened three more times. On the last occasion I heard a mocking voice from beyond the hedge call out ‘You’re a idiot!’ At once I caught up my umbrella and set off to investigate the source of this challenge. There, in the lane, was a man draped in what seemed to be a rug made from a polar bear – in the manner of Uncle Wesley’s tiger-skin, of which he was so proud. Clearly here was the ringleader of the trouble makers, wearing what was almost certainly stolen from his betters. In the interests of justice I proceeded to give him a sound thrashing, which I hope he learned from, as it cost me a perfectly serviceable umbrella. That which had many a good downpour left in it was all used up on one shower.

****

The All Idiots Day festivities of the Trunch area have, over the years, been a wonderful mixture of tradition and improvisation. Some elements have clearly survived through the mists of time. The procession of animal heads, for example, may well have its origins in the rituals of the Iceni. who lived in the area before the Romans. It has been suggested that Iceni meant ‘people of the horse’,* and throughout the region many horsy people may still be found. These people probably

invented the tradition of parading a man dressed as a horse. Over the years cocky people must have added the cock, sheepish people the sheep, and so on. The goat, it appears, was sponsored by the local pub.

Having processed through the village the revellers would split up to carry out all manner of jests, japes and jokes. Some of these practical jokes were themselves traditional, such as knocking on a door and running away, while others were pure inspiration.

Sid: My Great Uncle Albert used to specialise in impractical jokes. He used to do things like balance a bucket of water on a sliding door or make an apple pie bed with a real pie. But I've done one or two good ones in my time. Once I put a pig in the gents toilet of the Old Goat Inn and no one noticed for three days. Another time I gave my mother Dot a cup of tea in bed – that took her by surprise.

In 1904 it was 68 years since All Idiots Day and Good Friday last coincided, but everyone remembered that, as a consequence, the dowager Lady Silver-Darling never left the Hall again, and the church had to be reconsecrated. It is no wonder the vicar saw fit to avoid any repetition of such goings on.

* Lethbridge, T.C.(1964) Witches; *Investigating an Ancient Religion ,* p.79.

2 April, Saturday

This evening Maud returned with the most shocking news. It seems that Lord Silver-Darling's son, Doyley, was brutally assaulted this afternoon in the lane outside the house. He had been taking part in the day's festivities when he was attacked by a mad woman who launched a crazed assault upon him, inflicting severe injuries before he could escape. How strange that I heard nothing.

3 April, Sunday

What am I to do? I am in despair. If, as I now learn, Doyley Silver-Darling was the man in the polar bear rug, then I must be the madwoman.

****

The polar bear skin in question was a treasured possession of the Silver-Darling family. It's origins are obscure – so much so that the locals have been forced to invent theories of their own as to how it came to be in a little Norfolk village.

Sid: They reckon it all happened when Gerald Silver-Darling went on what they call the Grand Tour. The Tour become a lot less Grand when his ship dragged its anchor while putting in to Cromer and ended up off the West coast of Greenland. In fact they would have discovered the North-West Passage a century early if they hadn't been desperately trying to sail south-east.

Anyhow, on a hunting trip ashore Gerald got himself eaten by this polar bear. The crew didn't know what to do, so they caught the bear and brought it home. Well, the rich was always quick to discard the weak and embrace the strong, so the Silver-Darlings married it off to their youngest daughter.

The marriage went very well by all accounts, but that become illegal by accident when they brought in the law against bear baiting in 1835. This broke the bear's heart, and he pined to death, so they had him made into a hearth rug to avoid the cost of a funeral.

4 April, Monday

I have reached a decision. While I maintain that anyone who goes around behaving like a member of the working classes must expect to get the occasional thrashing, if he is the son of a Peer of the Realm he is bound to have delicate sensibilities. I have therefore decided to visit Doyley Silver-Darling and explain the facts frankly to him. To this end I have sent to the Hall for an appointment, which has been granted for tomorrow.

The event has caused a great stir in the village. It seems they think it perfectly normal for a future member of the House of Lords to parade the lanes dressed in a bear skin and are well aware of the identity of its occupant. They therefore assume this assault to have been committed by a person of unsound mind – perhaps a socialist – who they now fear may be still at loose. The only thing which prevents a general panic is their belief that the culprit is suffering from a monomania directed against bear skins. Nearby North Walsham has therefore cancelled a visit of the Brigade of Guards.

****

Doyley Silver-Darling (full name Doyley Quinton Ferdinando Silver-Darling) was a man who enjoyed life to the full. His family had lived in St Just-near-Trunch for generations and took a keen interest in local affairs. Indeed, they were personally

involved in many of them.

In 1904 Doyley was living in London, but he visited the village frequently to keep abreast of family business. While in Town he was often to be seen at the theatre or music hall, and he was especially fond of the operas of Gilbert and Sullivan. This was hardly surprising, as he was conceived at a performance of HMS Pinafore in 1878 and born – in the same box – at the premier of The Pirates Of Penzance in 1879. Lord Silver-Darling, by the way, did not mind these interruptions to his entertainment. He only attended the operas in the mistaken belief that the words were written by Fred Gilbert, who wrote his Lordship's favourite song, "The Man who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo'. We now know, of course, that Arthur Sullivan's collaborator on these works was W. S. Gilbert, of whom his Lordship had never heard.

5 April, Tuesday

What a charming man Doyley Silver-Darling is. One can instantly spot his breeding, even through the bandages. His somewhat surly butler, Herring, showed me in, and he made every effort to rise to greet me. When he had sunk back into his bath chair he gave me half a smile, that being all he was capable of, and asked 'Now what can I do for you, Mrs Prewd?' I was at a loss for words. How could I tell this man, clearly so handsome and athletic beneath the plaster, that it was I, a woman, who had caused his injuries? What might that do to such a fine and noble thoroughbred? I could not be the one to add insult to grievous bodily injury.

So I told him that I had felt I should visit him, since the awful incident had occurred outside my house. I sympathised with his injuries and agreed that these were, indeed, terrible times that such a thing could happen. I left as quickly as was seemly.

At least I shall not have to face him again soon as he is leaving for London to convalesce the moment he is fit to travel.

****

We know a good deal about Doyley Silver-Darling because his butler, Herring, later wrote two volumes of autobiography called / *Did It* and *What I Saw.*

I recall an incident which occurred on one of our many trips to the family estates in

St Just-near-Trunch. It would have been in the Spring of 1903 or 1904 when my master called me one morning to dress Him. ‘Your morning suit. Sir?’ I enquired, to which he replied, ‘No, you idiot, I will wear the bear skin.’ By this I knew He was going slumming in the village.

Later, as I was replating the silver in my pantry, I was summoned to go to Him quickly in His rooms. I found Him in a sorry state. ‘If you think I look bad you should see the other fellow,’ He groaned, as I helped Him to bed.

The affair was a cause célèbre in the village and had a strange sequel when a Lady from London came to see Him. I thought that if she had come all this way to His sick bed there might be something between them which I could turn to my advantage. My hopes were dashed, however, when it transpired that she was, in fact, living locally.

My master was horrified by her. He quickly decided that if He was to be subjected to appearances by this woman while He remained in St Just, then we must return to London at once.

(/ *Did It,* Chapter 3 – My Way)

6 April, Wednesday

With all the excitement of recent days I have neglected my task of recording the day-to-day life of the area, although it is beyond my comprehension why anyone should be interested in such a dreary subject.

Sunday, of course, was Easter Day, and breakfast was late. Maud seemed surprised when I berated her, saying that we must wait for the eggs to arrive ‘of course’. Eventually there was a knock at the back door, and four and a half minutes later my breakfast eggs were served. I told Maud that if there was a problem in getting eggs on time then someone should get the chickens up earlier of a morning, rather than let them perch about until all hours of the day. She began some excuse involving her brothers, but I made it clear that I do not accept excuses – only results. She sulked all day, but I ignored that, being too concerned over the business of the polar bear.

Sunday led to Monday, and Tuesday was dominated by my visit to the Hall. Now, perhaps, I can concentrate on getting this house and garden as I wish them to be,

training Maud to the apron, and trying to establish contact with a few decent people, if such there be in these uncivilised parts.

****

Mrs Prewd's breakfast eggs were late for good reason – they came all theway from nearby Knapton.

Sid: It weren't that we didn't have enough 'hen fruit' in Trunch. It was because in Knapton they had the old Easter custom of egg rolling. They used to roll painted eggs down the hill from Knapton towards Trunch every Easter morning. I don't know what they done it for – that seem daft to me. We never done it. We used to have our own custom. We used to wait at the bottom of the hill and carry the eggs off for breakfast.

Eggs had great symbolic meaning for rural people. They were used in witchcraft and divination, as well as in traditional medicines. They were reckoned to have an opposing effect to rhubarb, and many perfectly healthy people regularly wore an egg and rhubarb poultice just to be safe.

All of this shows the difference between Mrs Prewd's limited urban horizons and the more profound understanding of rural life. What she was waiting for were not merely eggs, but symbols. And, as any countryman will tell you, you can't rush a symbol.

11 April, Monday

Reverend Mullett called today to ask for help in making new kneelers for the church. I quickly agreed that Maud would be delighted to help him, in her free time. As a more personal contribution I offered my advice. I suggested green for the north-west nave and yellow for the south-west. These were the colours of my late husband's regiment and whenever I see them I think of him proudly marching at the head of the column, his hand on the lead of the official mascot.

I asked the vicar how his work among fallen women was progressing, but the question seemed only to depress him. 'These are terrible times, Mrs Prewd,' he replied. 'I have been unable to find a woman in need of my services for some days now.'

This lack has left him unsatisfied and I fully sympathise with his feelings. It is so

frustrating when one wishes to patronise the working classes and they are not available.

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St Just's Church is what the ordnance survey describes as a 'Church without a tower'. That is to say, the tower is completely surrounded by the church. This gives a double nave, the other two sides being cloisters.

The church was designed this way after a furious row between Sir Hugo de Gimingham, then Lord of the Manor, and the Bishop of Norwich. Sir Hugo wanted to build a church pointing north to south, but the Bishop ruled that it must point east to west, as usual. This would have meant the church pointing straight at the great hall: 'Like unto sum grate diggette,' as Sir Hugo put it. As he was a very violent and sexually active man, I can understand him not wanting to be constantly reminded of the swift arrow of God's judgement.

After much coming and going of letters, emissaries and 'gifts', the Bishop agreed to the compromise we see today. This placed the altar in the correct place, while sparing Sir Hugo's conscience – such as it was. In his letter of permission the Bishop wrote: 'In this way shalle it be behelde by all that this hollie building pointeth in no direction but upwarde, to the grater glorie of He who ruleth over all.' Sir Hugo, thinking this was a reference to himself, agreed.

14 April, Thursday

This afternoon I made the acquaintance of the village schoolmistress. It happened during a walk round the area which I took in search of some redeeming feature – a mission which was as great a failure as I had feared it would be.

As I approached the School I heard a dreadful noise. Then I saw a writhing heap of children in the road. As they were in my path I set about them with a stout stick, which I carry for just such eventualities. I was surprised to find, as the curs fled my blows, that at the bottom of this heap was a young woman. I had begun to reprimand her for setting such a bad example when she interrupted me to say that she had been attempting to stop the fight. I, of course, reprimanded her further for interrupting me, and then asked who was supposed to be in charge of the urchins. She instantly broke down in tears and admitted they were her responsibility. 'Thank goodness the boys have gone over to Southrepps' she wailed. I did my best to

comfort her by telling her to snap out of it and behave like an Englishwoman. This seemed to help and she stopped beating her head against the wall.

Miss Pickerel – for that is her name – is a mere slip of a girl and has only recently become a certificated teacher. She has, like myself, come to this dreadful place from a more civilised background -though not, of course, as civilised as my own. The poor thing is appalled at the brutality of life of the common people and most especially of their common children. She feels it is her job to turn these swine into pearls. I had to disabuse her of this notion. The most she can hope for is to domesticate them a little. I offered to pass onto her a few tips of my Uncle Wesley's, if she cared to take tea with me tomorrow. She was pathetically grateful, and insisted on kissing my hem. This was not an altogether unpleasant experience.

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The Trunch Bored School was founded by Lord Silver-Darling in 1872. It was obviously much needed – not least by the stonemason who carved the name over the door. Its stated purpose was 'to ensure that all the children of the village receive an education fitting to their station, and to instil proper respect for Church, State and the property of others'. The Silver-Darlings, of course, went to Eton.

In its early years the Bored School had a patchy history. His Lordship saw it mainly as a source of cheap labour, and he would often cart off the whole school, teacher included, to work on the estate or in the house. This was eventually stopped by the Attendance Officer, though His Lordship was furious. He wrote to the Chief Education Officer, Dr C. Gamble:

What better training for working life can there be than the experience of work itself? Indeed, I venture to say that in years to come such 'work experience', as I call it, will become an accepted way of keeping these young ruffians out of trouble. The devil finds work for idle hands, so it is our duty, surely, to keep those hands busy.

No doubt, as His Lordship turns in his grave over the many changes since his time, he at least wears a self-satisfied smile about this particular matter.

15 April, Friday

This village schoolmistress is indeed an unfortunate creature. She is a victim of her parents' wish to better her. Determined to pull them-selves up from the slime of the

lower orders they decided from the start that their daughter should become a teacher. Realising that their own names, Ethel and Stanley, marked them immediately for what they were, they christened her ‘Miss’, and made sure that she was diligent in her lessons. Her education having been completed with a course at the Norwich Training College, she obtained the post of schoolmistress in St Just-near-Trunch.

Being of poor stock she has no natural authority, and finds it impossible to maintain order. She has prepared excellent lessons on such topics as ‘The Tributaries of the Amazon’, ‘The Life Cycle of the Tsetse Fly’, and so on, but her ungrateful charges show not the slightest interest or respect.

As I allowed her to pour my tea I gave her some advice on discipline, gleaned from the wisdom of my late and much lamented Uncle Wesley. ‘Never work with children – they are animals’ seemed hardly tactful, so I tried some of his other aphorisms. ‘The little children suffer if they come unto me’ seemed more appropriate, although neither of us could glean much from ‘The man is father to the child.’

What delighted Miss Pickerel most were some of the practical suggestions I was able to make. She brightened up a good deal, promising to try them out at once. She now realises that what these people need is discipline rather than knowledge. As I pointed out to her, what use have they for knowledge? They are better off remaining ignorant. Even a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing and it is our responsibility to protect them from such dangers.

She went home much pleased, and I dare say that if she applies my advice wisely she will remain in her post for many years to come.

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Miss Pickerel did stay at the village school for a long time. She was still there when Sid’s father, Henry, and his uncle, George, attended some twenty years later. Even when Sid himself went to the school it had changed little since Miss Pickerel’s time:

I remember we used to have ‘The Three Ares’. That was ‘Are you paying attention?’, ‘Are you going to get on with some work?’ and’ Are you trying to be clever?’ We knew the answer to all of them in them days. It was ‘No’ to all three.

We also used to do reading, writing and arithmetic – they were known as the R, the

W and the A. But we done a lot of other letters besides them three. We done R.I. and we done P.T. That last one was my favourite. The boys played football and the girls played netball. ‘Course the boys always won, by kicking the ball out of the girls’ hands.

In the playground the girls used to tuck their skirts into their knickers and do handstands. Except some of them was so poor that they couldn’t afford no knickers, so they din’t do it. I often wondered where them particular girls kept their hankies.

If you was ‘never absent, never late’ for all your time at school they used to give you a watch when you left. That din’t make a lot of sense to me. I mean, if you’d never been late all them years you obviously din’t need a watch. They should have given it to someone who was late all the time, like me. Then I’d have known how late I was. All in all I din’t get much from school other than education.

23 April, Saturday

How typical of this place! Today is not only our national day, the feast of Saint George, but also the birthday of our greatest writer, William Shakespeare. Yet here there is almost no sign that they are aware of either festival. There is a limp rag, which may or may not be the flag of St George, hanging from the flagpole of the church, but as far as I can tell the day goes otherwise unrecognised outside this house.

I myself invited the Vicar and Lord Silver-Darling to join me for the occasion, and also allowed Miss Pickerel to come. His Lordship was unable to attend, but sent a most gracious apology.

So we were three that sat down to the ‘roast beef of Old England’, accompanied, for some reason, by a nasty doughy substance that Maud calls ‘domplings’, which I am afraid to say the vicar ate with his knife. After dinner I gave a selection of suitable readings, finishing with that stirring speech from Richard II, Act II, Scene i:

‘This royal throne of Kings … this dear, dear land.’ As a matter of taste I omitted the line about ‘this teeming womb’ – I fear the Bard does tend to vulgarity at times.

Miss Pickerel paid rapt attention throughout, while Rev. Mullett closed his eyes and nodded in concentration, with only the occasional murmur escaping his lips. Indeed, he remained thus for some time after I had finished, so moved was he. Eventually

we had to shake him to bring him out of his reverie. In conclusion, we sang Mr Blake's 'Jerusalem', which Miss Pickerel accompanied on her violoncello. At least the three of us have done our patriotic duty today.

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In talking about St George's Day in St Just Mrs Prewd was not in possession of one very important fact.

Sid: What she din't know was that at that time we was still technically at war with England! It was all because of the smuggling, you see. During the Nelsonic Wars, as we called them, the French said they wouldn't supply any more goods unless we agreed to be on their side. So we made a pact with them. We wouldn't fight against them, and if they won then St Just would be the capital of Norfolk. Mind you, that was just a trick, that was. Everyone knows that the capital of Norfolk is an N, and you can't change that, even if you do keep your hand in your inside pocket all the time. Still, you couldn't expect nothing much else from them. The French never was much good at English.

Napoleon was ultimately defeated – twice – and the village kept quiet about the alliance. They cancelled the plan to build Napoleon's Column, which in their practical way they had designed to be both memorial and pigeon scarer. This was a poor idea anyway, as anyone can confirm by visiting Trafalgar Square.

But the village did not forget. Throughout the 19th century they must have been the only village in Norfolk to celebrate Bastille Day rather than Saint George's. The whole matter was not resolved until the 1960s, when the French rediscovered the alliance. Harold Wilson, fearful of what might happen if the village followed the example of Rhodesia and made a Unilateral Declaration of Independence, came to the village for the so-called 'Goat Talks', and a secret peace treaty was signed between the Parish Council and Her Majesty's Government.

St George's Day is now celebrated in St Just-near-Trunch just as it is anywhere else. That is, hardly at all.

We now will praise St George, who this great race did forge;

Who saved the English brood from filthy foreign food.

His name we celebrate, to show that England's great,

Though he must share the day with some bloke who wrote plays.

In his name we unfurled our flag around the world,

And without fear or favour, we fought most of our neighbours.

For En-ger-land is best, far better than the rest,

And if you have a different view, then we will now fight you.

(*The Old St George*, from the songbook of Bigots Against Tolerance)

25 April, Monday

Yesterday I tried to complain to Lord Silver-Darling about the noise, but could not make myself heard over the din of the church bells. Who would believe that the countryside could be such a rowdy place? I had expected that I would miss the bustle of London – the cries of the barrow boys and costers as I trod on their toes, the skirl of the barrel organ, and so on. I never imagined that I should now look upon it as a place of relative calm. Yet here, where I expected at least to have peace and quiet, I have found my ears constantly assailed by every sort of din.

Firstly, there is a cacophony of bird noises. All day huge numbers of the nasty things flap and hop about the place, from the big black ones which emit a sort of croaking sound and look like a ludicrous parody of the elegant ravens which grace The Tower, to the little brown ones, which we have in London, but not in such unnecessary variety. At night these rest and their place is taken by some which I have been unable to see clearly, due to the lack of gas lighting, but which intermittently impersonate the fog horn of a transatlantic liner. Then, as dawn arrives, and one is finally so tired as to believe that sleep might be possible despite them, all the rest return and join in a ghastly chorus which finally dashes all hope of repose.

Then, at 5,30 a.m., the first of the labourers pass down the lane whistling. They can do this at a prodigious volume, aided no doubt by the emptiness of their skulls. Later, they return with great clumping horses, whinnying and snorting. Sometimes the horses echo them. From then on the lane is a constant mayhem of labourers, farmers, tradesmen, merchants and other wastrels. Where they are all going I have no idea. It has occurred to me that they are simply parading back and forth to annoy me, for they manage to make a great deal of noise without any obvious

achievement.

This goes on all day long until, at dusk, the ploughman home-ward plods his noisy way. But he does not leave the day to darkness and to me. As soon as he has had his tea he heads for that den of vileness, the Goat Inn, from whence he staggers home again at all hours, singing some dreadful doggerel.

But even that is not the end of it. In the so-called still hours of the night men and carts may be heard going past in the pitch dark, on quite unimaginable errands. Once, a loud whisper of ‘Stop stamping your wooden leg, Albert, you’ll wake the old biddy’ was just audible above their rattling. I asked Maud about this, but she changed the subject by suggesting that I watch the wall. I was inclined to tell her that it was not by watching walls that I reached my station in life. I stopped myself in time, however: I am not exactly enamoured of where I find myself today.

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Unlike today’s farms those of Mrs Prewd’s time were highly labour intensive. Agriculture had picked up from the slump of the 1870s, when labourers starved in ditches for lack of work. Now they could go fairly hungry in dilapidated tied cottages. They were happy to find any means of earning a bob or two, and clearly the smuggling habit had not died out.

‘Watch the wall’ was a local expression which meant exactly what it said. In those days the walls of cottages were often lined with old newspapers, this being the cheapest material available. ‘Watch the wall’, therefore, meant ‘wait until it become public knowledge’ – in other words, mind your own business.

26 April, Tuesday

This morning, as the labourers made their rowdy way along the lane to Away Farm, it occurred to me that I had no idea what they do there. For myself I have no interest in the matter, but for the completeness of this diary I felt that I should find out. So I put on my coat and galoshes and followed them, as inconspicuously as I could. Eventually they reached a group of buildings which surround a muddy yard. I use the word ‘muddy’ in order to spare the reader any hint of the dreadful stench which in fact greeted my nostrils. It is lucky that I inherited my Uncle’s strong stomach.

The men crossed the yard and went into some kind of a store, from which they emerged with bales and dirty sacks. These they took to the various other buildings, and shortly there arose a whole variety of animal cries and calls.

At that point I returned home, unable to stand the smell any longer, and mused upon this curious episode. How could any sense be made of these events? I decided to put into practice Mr Sherlock Holmes's dictum about eliminating the impossible and thereby being left with the truth, however improbable. By this method, the only logical conclusion is that these men are employed to carry bales and sacks into buildings, and then to perform animal impersonations.

A saying of Uncle Wesley's, the one man I have found truly reliable, sprang to mind: 'We are all descended from the apes. Some of us, however, are more descended than others'.

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This might be the time to say something about Mrs Prewd's uncle, whom she so greatly admired. He had explored what he called 'The Light Continent', where he hobnobbed with Hottentot chiefs, wrestled with elephants, sold his valet into slavery, and so on. It was he who first lost the African tribe which Sir Lawrence Van der Post later rediscovered. But what Miriam Prewd most admired about her Uncle, other than his stomach, was his strength of character. A man who had beaten the Zulu hordes at cricket stood no nonsense from the English working classes. While some found his pith helmet, knee-length khaki shorts and coolie drawn rickshaw a little eccentric in Basingstoke, she thought he was the greatest thing before sliced bread – which, of course, hadn't been invented then.

They were very close and she was broken hearted when he died from a snake bite after a visit to the Natural History Museum in Kensington, but she was determined that his spirit should live on in her, his closest living relative. She always carried in her handbag his unpublished memoirs – *A Straight Bat, and Other Improved Mammals* – and often looked to it for inspiration. I wonder whether she might not have leaned heavily on Chapter Three during her stay in St Just-near-Trunch:

Foreigners

What a chap must remember about Freddy Foreigner is this: he is not British. It's not his fault, of course. And being not British, and therefore inferior, he has his own

ways of doing things. Nothing wrong with that, of course, if he doesn't mind changing them to the proper way.

(Chapter 3 – 'Empire, Empire, Stick 'Em Up You Cur')

27 April, Wednesday

As I was enjoying a post-prandial nap this afternoon Maud came into the room and muttered something about an 'old trout'. My hand was halfway to the horsewhip when she hurriedly made herself clear and announced a visit from Farmer Trout, of Away Farm, and ushered said worthy into the room.

There before me was a big, red-faced man, wearing tweeds, a smelly pipe and muddy boots. After placing newspaper on a chair I asked him to sit, but he declined. 'I'll come to the point missus,' he said. 'I'm a forthright man, so I'll not beat about the bird in the bush. Fine words pickle no onions, if you take my meaning. It's all very well for you city folk to go all around the houses, but we country people like to go straight in by the back door. I'm just going to speak out plain.'

I believe we might have gone on corning straight to the point all day, had I not interrupted him. 'Kindly cease prevaricating and state your business,' I insisted, and the sound of a five syllable word stopped him in his muddy tracks.

'Well, it's like this. Missus. I want to know what you was doing hanging around my farm yesterday morning. I don't know what your business there was, but it's none of your business. That land is my land and in future you'll ask my permission to go on it, and I shan't grant it. There, I've said what I come to say, so what do you say to that?'

With that he turned on his heel, grinding mud into the carpet, and clumped out, leaving my pithy rejoinder unuttered.

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Elias Trout was well regarded In the village, being known as a sound farmer and an excellent player of the spoons. But, like many a stout yeoman, he didn't take well to interference in his affairs.

Sid: He weren't a bad sort of a bloke, for a farmer. We used to call him 'Old Brown' Trout. He had a daughter called Rainbow, who married a bloke from Knapton.

Actually, at one time I used to scare his crows. I din't mean to scare them, you understand – they just sort of took a dislike to me.

Anyhow, farmers in them days could be proper marionettes when it come to their own land. I remember once when a bloke in a bowler hat from the Misery of Agriculture come to see Old Trout, and said he was there to see if he could be of any help. Trout give him a hoe and said 'If you want to help you can go and weed them carrots.' That's how he was: Trout by name and Trout by nature.

28 April, Thursday

This morning I sat down with pen and ink, and carefully composed a letter to Farmer Trout. I let him know, in no uncertain terms, what I think of his vulgar manners and his grubby land. I had Maud take it round to the farm and was delighted when she returned with what must surely be a letter of humble repentance.

When I opened it, however, I found only my own letter with a note scrawled on the back. Eventually I deciphered this as: 'Farmer Trout say he canot reed and he canot rite, but he accept yore appology what he assume you rit about.' I was, of course, appalled: what a dreadfully illiterate letter. I asked Maud who had written this frightful piece of prose and she said that it had 'been done' by a travelling salesman from Ipswich, who was at the farm to sell what she called 'machines of the devil'.

After luncheon I was visited again by the obnoxious Trout. 'Mrs Prewt,' the farmer boomed at me, 'I have come here to personally accept your apology for spying on me. As far as I'm concerned the last word has been said and that word is: enough is enough. I'm not one to bear a grudge, so you can rest assured this is the last you'll hear of it. I've forgotten it already and I'll remind you of that next time I see you.' Then, for the second day running, he left my presence without my leave, leaving me with much to say, but no one to say it to.

Reflecting on his behaviour over the past two days has convinced me of the veracity of my theory about the origins of the animal noises. I would put nothing beyond someone as deranged as Farmer Trout.

Reviews:

"Written in Kipper's typical deadpan style, this is the hilarious mock diary of London lady Miriam Prewd."

(Literary Norfolk)

“There are half-a-dozen good throwaway jokes per page, and it should remind you of Sir Henry at Rawlinson End, with a dash of Flann O’Brien. Best read drunk.”

(The Guardian)

“A fascinating addition to the genre of country journals.”

(Radio 2)